

Day 24: Afterlife by PaperBodies

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Summary:

Billy woke up with a jerk and looked around. He was sitting in an uncomfortable plastic chair, and he had evidently been sleeping with his head tipped back against the wall. He appeared to be in some kind of waiting room, but he didn't remember where he was, or what he was waiting for. He glanced around, but there weren't any signs to help him out. There was a desk with a bored-looking woman behind it at the far end of the room, but she didn't look like she was eager to field any questions; her glare was noticeable and legitimately intimidating.

Billy glanced around again, and saw that the room was pretty full. Oddly, the other end of it seemed to stretch way off into the distance. He blinked a few times, but the room still looked endless. He felt the first stirrings of apprehension in his chest. He looked at the people in the chairs around him, but no one was else was even looking up. They all just seemed content to wait.

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He stayed where he was for maybe another ten minutes, scanning the room uneasily the whole time. People kept getting up and walking to the woman behind the desk, handing her something, and disappearing through a set of double doors behind her. He didn't know how they knew to approach, or what it was they were handing over. He looked down, but there was nothing in his hands. He felt overwhelmed for a minute, and closed his eyes against the sudden threat of tears.

Then a familiar voice caught his attention. He looked up to see Steve Harrington, of all people, talking to the woman at the desk. Steve looked different. He was wearing dark jeans and a red sweater under a dark, high-collared coat that fell to his knees. There was arrogance written in every line of his body, and his tone made it clear that whatever he was doing here was beneath him. They weren't even really friends—thanks mostly to Billy—but Billy still felt a surge of pure relief at the sight of him.

"There's been a mix-up," Steve said to the woman. "Someone was sent here by mistake, so they sent me to collect him." The woman looked at Steve, clearly unimpressed.

“That’s impossible,” she said flatly. Steve rolled his eyes and sighed, clearly communicating that she was wasting his time.

“I have the paperwork,” he said, sliding something across the desk. “It’s all there.” She glanced through the papers and narrowed her eyes. Then she looked back up at Steve.

“This wasn’t our mistake,” she said, and now her voice held a thread of uncertainty. Steve grinned at her, smile sharper than Billy had ever seen it.

“No one said it was,” he said, in a tone of voice that indicated that someone had absolutely said that. They stared at each other for a long moment. “Do you need to get approval from a supervisor?” Steve finally asked, all smarmy condescension. Billy was a little impressed. The woman glared at him, but shook her head. She slid the papers back across the desk.

“You’re fine to take him.”

“I’ll be sure to note your cooperation in my report,” Steve said drily. Then he turned away from the desk, tucking the papers back into the inside pocket of his coat. He walked over to Billy. As soon as Steve got close enough, Billy opened his mouth to ask what the fuck was going on, but Steve spoke before Billy could.

“Let’s go,” he said, and nothing in his demeanor gave any indication that he knew Billy at all. It wasn’t until Billy cautiously stood up that Steve added in a low voice, pitched so that only Billy could hear it, “Follow my lead and *please* keep your mouth shut.” Billy had a number of valid questions, like *where are we?* and *what the fuck is happening?* and *why does bored arrogance look so fucking good on you?*, but there was a thread of what sounded like real fear in Steve’s voice, so Billy didn’t ask any of them. He kept his head down and his mouth shut as Steve wrapped a hand around his upper arm and steered him out of the room, away from the woman behind the desk, who was watching them with narrowed eyes.

Steve led Billy through a confusing warren of corridors. They passed through at least a dozen hallways lined with doors that all looked the same to Billy, but Steve seemed to know exactly where he was going.

Finally, they turned into a tiny office that contained a desk, a filing cabinet, and a tall cabinet with double doors. Steve closed the door behind them and locked it, and then he exhaled loudly and his shoulders sagged with relief. He shot Billy a weak smile.

“I can’t believe that worked,” he said, and then rubbed his hands over his face. Billy just stared at him, a little thrown by the abrupt change in his demeanor.

“What the fuck is going on, Harrington?” Steve looked at him a little warily and didn’t say anything for a long time.

“How much do you remember about the last few days?” he finally asked. Billy thought about it and frowned.

“I hit something with my car?” he said tentatively, and it came out as a question. Steve nodded and then hesitated.

“Nothing after that?” he asked. Billy furrowed his brow and thought about it, but he only had the barest flashes of memory after that, and none of them made any sense at all.

“You’re starting to freak me out, Harrington,” he said. Steve stared at him for a long moment.

“Ok, I swear that I will give you a far more in-depth explanation once we get out of here, but time is not on our side right now, so I have to give you the short version.” Steve took a deep breath. “There’s at least one other dimension, there are monsters in it, you got possessed by one, then you died, and now you’re in the afterlife. I’m here to try to sneak you out of hell.” Billy stared at him, frowning.

“You’re fucking with me,” he finally said. Steve sighed.

“What about me suggests that I am fucking with you right now? The anxiety? The fear? The way I am definitely not laughing?” he asked, and Billy studied him. His eyes were big and dark and sincere. Billy recalled the endless waiting room and the way Steve’s relief had been palpable when they made it out of the maze of corridors and into this office.

“You’re serious?” he asked. Steve nodded.

"I wish I wasn't, but yeah. That's what was happening that night at the Byers—I was trying to keep the kids from fighting monsters, which did not work out, by the way." Billy barely heard him; he was still stuck on the fact that he had *died*. He almost asked *how* he had died, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know. The flashes of memory he did have were making him uneasy. Then something occurred to him.

"Wait, if this is hell, what are you doing here? Did you also die?" He wasn't sure how to feel about that. He didn't want Steve to be dead, but he was happy not to be here alone. But Steve shook his head.

"No," he said, hand going to the back of his neck. He grimaced. "My dad works here, so I can go back and forth." Billy's jaw dropped.

"Your dad is a demon?" Billy asked incredulously. Now Steve *had* to be fucking with him. Steve snorted.

"God, no. My dad wishes he was a demon. He's some kind of manager in the Records Department."

"What the *fuck*?" Billy whispered to himself. "Your dad is a bureaucrat. In hell," he said flatly to Steve.

"Yes, and I promise I will answer all of your questions about that later, but for now, we kind of need to hurry." Steve crossed the room to the tall cabinet in the corner. He opened it and pumped his fist. "Yessss," he said to himself, and then he pulled something off a hanger and tossed it to Billy. Billy didn't catch it. He squared his shoulders instead. Steve's mention of that night in November had raised another question.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked. Steve turned from where he was still rifling through the cabinet, muttering *come on, come on* to himself.

"What?" he asked.

"You heard me," Billy said. "I was a dick to you, kind of generally, so why?" Steve rolled his eyes, impatient.

"Because El can read minds, so she's known what my dad does for a

while now, and Max was devastated when you died, and then El looked at me expectantly when they were talking about it, and I can't disappoint her. So. Here I fucking am." He nodded at the pile of fabric he had tossed to Billy before. "Now put that on." Billy continued to ignore it instead.

"So you're here because of Max?" he asked slowly. "And El?" Something about that hurt, for some reason. Steve blinked at him, and then his expression softened a little.

"No matter how big of a dick you were, you didn't deserve to *die*," he said firmly. "Now change so we can get out of here." Billy picked up whatever Steve had tossed at him earlier, and discovered that it was French maid's costume, with a short little skirt and apron. He looked at Steve.

"No fucking way," he said. Steve rolled his eyes.

"Hell has these, like, interns, okay? It's a fucking terrible job and everyone's a dick to you, and you have to fetch just a staggering amount of terrible coffee, and you have to wear the stupid fucking maid outfit." Billy grinned suddenly.

"Are you speaking from experience, pretty boy? Because it kind of sounds like you're speaking from experience." Steve flushed.

"I am not having this conversation," he said. "Just put it on and keep your mouth shut, and maybe we can get out of here without getting literally flayed, ok?" Billy crossed his arms and leaned back against the desk.

"Answer the question or I'm not doing anything."

"I don't think you're grasping the stakes here, *amigo*," Steve said, but Billy just stared him down until Steve finally threw his hands up and caved. "Fine, yes, I interned for my dad for a summer, and I wore the fucking outfit, and it was the worst summer of my life. On the plus side, that's where I picked up all the skills I needed to forge the papers I used to get you out of intake, so at least it was good for something. Now *please* get dressed." Billy eyed the outfit again.

“The clothes I’m wearing now were fine on the way here,” he pointed out, and Steve huffed impatiently.

“Yes, because we’re still on the intake floor, so it’s not unusual to see Souls wandering around. Unfortunately, there’s no exit on this floor. We have to go further into hell to get to an exit, and we’ll get caught instantly if you look like that.” He gestured at Billy’s dirty jeans and tank top. Billy looked at the maid outfit again.

“This is humiliating,” he said. Steve shot him a look.

“Yes, obviously, this is *hell*. The humiliation is intentional.” Billy sighed.

“I’m only putting it on if you promise to model yours for me later,” he tried. Steve narrowed his eyes.

“I’m already rescuing you from hell, Hargrove—don’t push your luck.” Billy huffed, but didn’t move.

“You know, I’m not sure it’s worth coming back from hell if I never get to see you in this outfit,” he said, holding it up in front of him.

“You cannot be fucking serious,” Steve said. Billy still made no move to get dressed. He just cocked an eyebrow at Steve.

“Fuuuuuuuuck,” Steve groaned. “Why are you like this? Fine, whatever, just put it the fuck on so we can go.”

“That’s the spirit,” Billy said, and reluctantly got dressed. Once he was ready, Steve hesitated, looking uncertain. “What’s the problem?” Billy asked, wanting to get this over with. The skirt on his outfit was *short*.

“I was hoping to find another badge in the wardrobe,” he said. “The fact that you don’t have one might be a problem.”

“Badge?” Billy asked, and Steve gestured at something that was pinned to the lapel of his coat. It looked like an ancient coin, made out of some kind of dark metal, old enough so that whatever had been inscribed on it was worn almost smooth. Billy didn’t recognize the language.

"It's how you get into, and more importantly out of, hell," Steve said, and then he shrugged. "Guess we're winging it. Be ready to follow my lead, and try to act like a scared intern." Steve squared his shoulders and led the way out the door.

They passed through five floors without incident, though Billy stopped really looking around after the second floor. Some of the doors were open, and he saw and heard things that were definitely going to haunt his nightmares forever. After that, it was surprisingly easy to act intimidated. He kept his head down, glancing up occasionally at the tight line of Steve's shoulders under his clearly expensive coat. Steve had put the expression of bored arrogance back on as soon as they left the office, and his strides were purposeful. He moved like he had somewhere to be, and no one questioned him.

Soon, they were standing in front of a bank of elevators, and Steve's shoulders relaxed just slightly as an elevator opened in front of them. He stepped inside and gestured for Billy to follow. A triumphant smile was just starting to grow on Steve's face as the elevator doors closed, and then a slim hand reached between the doors, causing them to open again.

Billy was watching Steve, so he saw the way Steve's eyes widened when a tall, curvy woman stepped onto the elevator. She smiled at them, and somehow the smile seemed to contain too many teeth. She was wearing a low-cut red dress that hugged every single one of her curves, and a fitted black blazer. A large gold badge was pinned to the front of the blazer.

"Floor negative thirteen, please," she said to Steve in a low, husky voice. He swallowed hard and hit the button for that floor, and then the button for the lobby. They rode in silence for a couple of floors, and then the woman spoke again.

"Where are you two headed?" she asked pleasantly. Steve opened his mouth to answer and she held up a warning finger. "Before you say anything, I should warn you that some people like to say that I invented lying. So I'm very good at recognizing it." She gave the shark-toothed smile again, and Steve took a long breath. Billy was a

little impressed by how even his voice was when he finally spoke.

“Just headed home,” Steve said. The woman raised one impeccably groomed eyebrow.

“With a Soul dressed as an intern?” she asked, and Steve closed his eyes and winced. The woman gave a wave of her hand and the elevator slowed to a stop. “Why don’t you try that again?” she said, her tone icy. Steve opened his eyes and squared his shoulders.

“I *am* heading home,” he said. “My dad works in the Records Department, so I’m just visiting. I’m not technically authorized to take him with me, but I’m doing it anyway,” he said. Her smile this time was a little less threatening.

“Better,” she said, and then she cocked her head. “Why?” she asked.

“What?” Steve asked blankly.

“You’re taking an enormous risk. We both know what happens if I turn you in, and we both know that it’s going to be very, *very* painful.” She took a step toward Steve as she said it, but Billy stepped between them before he even really thought about it.

“Leave him alone,” he said in a low voice. “I’m the one who’s supposed to be here, so if you want to threaten someone, you can threaten me.” Billy heard Steve sigh behind him, and then Steve grabbed his arm to turn him around.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he hissed.

“We already got caught,” Billy pointed out, “and the only reason you’re here is to help me. Let me deal with the fallout.” Steve frowned at him, eyes dark. He stepped further into Billy’s space.

“You didn’t break any rules,” he said firmly. “I did.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Billy said angrily. Steve threw his arms out in frustration.

“Oh, *I’m* being ridiculous?” he shot back. “You don’t even know what you’re volunteering for. Have you ever seen someone get drawn and

quartered? Because I have.”

“Oh, *interesting*,” the woman practically purred, and they turned to look at her. She was watching them, her eyes wide with delight.

“Both of you have a little fire, don’t you?” she said thoughtfully. Then she turned to Billy and eyed him critically. “You’re never making it past the lobby dressed like that,” she said. She waved her hand again, and Billy was wearing jeans and a dark red button-down. Only the bottom two buttons were buttoned and she smiled, amused. “I see we both appreciate a deep vee,” she said, and Billy flushed a little. She laughed. Steve was watching her, his brow furrowed.

“Why are you helping us?” he asked. “Not that we don’t appreciate it, but...” Steve trailed off, but she nodded as though he had finished the sentence. She shrugged and then smiled brightly.

“Because chaos is often far more fun than upholding the rules. Besides,” she added thoughtfully, “I can’t say that I feel any particular sense of loyalty to either side of the afterlife.” There was just a hint of bitterness to her tone and Steve’s eyes widened as realization hit.

“You’re Lilith,” he breathed, and her smile returned.

“I *am*,” she agreed.

“Lilith?” Billy blurted out before he could stop himself. “Like, from the Bible?”

“From some versions of it, yes,” she said.

“So you’re a demon?” Billy asked.

“No one seems to be able to agree on exactly what I am,” she said cheerfully.

“But you’re definitely supposed to be evil,” Steve said, frowning. “All the stories agree—“ She rolled her eyes as she cut him off.

“Never underestimate the power of a story that people are eager to believe,” she said. She looked at Billy as she said it, and he found

himself thinking about all the times that Neil had managed to convince some authority figure or another that Billy *needed* a firm hand to keep him in line. He shuddered a little. She kept talking. “Besides, it’s extremely rare that anyone is either completely good or completely evil. Even here in the afterlife, people switch sides all the time. Lucifer gets the most attention because he made a gigantic production out of it, as per usual, but it happens very regularly.” They both stared at her. Steve opened his mouth to say something, but she glanced down at her watch. “Oh hell,” she said, “Now I’m going to be late.”

She casually waved her hand and the elevator started moving again. Moments later, they heard a ding and the doors slid open onto what could have been the lobby from any moderately fancy high-rise office building.

“Good luck,” she said as she rushed them out of the elevator.

They almost made it. They had crossed the lobby and could see the wide glass double doors that opened onto a busy sidewalk when a uniformed guard stepped in front of them.

“Just need to see *both* of your badges,” he said with a glare at Billy. “You are of course aware that it is building policy to have your badge visible at all times,” the guard added in a monotone.

“Of course,” Billy said with a smile. “Let me just...” he patted at his pants pockets, as though he was going to find a badge in there, and he felt something in one of the back pockets. He pulled it out and looked at it. It was a shiny black rectangle the size of a business card. It felt heavy and cool in Billy’s hand. As he looked at it, the name *Lilith* seemed to rise up out of the depths of the card. It flowed across the front in a blood-red script and then vanished again. The guard paled as he looked at it.

“Sorry, sir,” he said quickly, eyes glued to the card. “You didn’t say that you were one of the Lady’s special guests. My sincerest apologies, and please enjoy the rest of your day.” The guard escorted them to the glass doors, and even held the door open for them. He gave them a little salute as they left.

“Wow,” said Steve, once they had made it a few blocks from the building with no sign of pursuit. “I gotta be honest—I was *not* expecting that to go as well as it did.”

“Yeah,” Billy replied absently, turning the card over in his hand. As he looked at it, he saw a message floating into view on the back in the same blood-red script. He read the four lines and felt the beginnings of a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. *That was the least boring part of my day. You’re both adorable, and I hope you make it work. If you ever get back into trouble, feel free to do a summoning. I might even answer.*

Billy slung one arm around Steve’s shoulder as they made their way down the busy sidewalk.

“You owe me any number of explanations, pretty boy,” he said, “but first, about your promise to model that intern uniform for me...” Steve sighed heavily.

“You have the weirdest fucking priorities,” he said.

Author's Note:

Look, I don't know either. My brain is just like this.

Shout out to The Good Place and Good Omens for probably inspiring some of the vibe here, and for being kickass shows about or featuring the afterlife.